

Speech by KZN Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo on the occasion of a celebration of having 1 million patients on ART in KwaZulu Natal

13 November 2015

Today we are celebrating the successes of our antiretroviral programme, which recently surpassed 1 million patients.

The roll out of these lifesaving drugs has indeed brought hope to many people who were just waiting for their demise as, at the beginning, HIV and AIDS was seen as a 'death sentence'.

We are in fact commemorating **over a decade** of sustaining and prolonging lives of more than a million citizens of our Province.

What all this basically means is that more than a million South Africans in KwaZulu Natal **have had their life expectancy improved** and increased because of your contribution.

Now, allow me to simplify what improved life expectancy means.

The improvements in the life expectancy of ordinary South Africans means that if there was a person who could have died at the age of 49/50, that person has now had his/her lifespan increased and may only die after the age of 60.

A South African who is dying at the age of 49 is very lucky to have his/her children, probably yes, one of your children could be at the university but the last born, if you are having 4 children could still be in high school or lower.

If you die at the age of 49, you thus hope and depend on your first born that he or she will take care of the other children. Your three children are basically at the mercy of the older one.

It is more acceptable to die from the age of 61 or higher, as you are probably then a grandmother/father. None of us, at the age of 61, will still be having a child at a primary school level.

For this remarkable achievement, we thank and recognise the wisdom; guidance and leadership of our Premier, Hon Senzo Mchunu, who also serves as the **Chairperson of the Provincial Council on AIDS**.

The Premier informed us that he expects the Department of Health to be the mainstay of the “Stepping Up the Efforts/ S’khuphula Umfutho” HIV Epidemic Response for Kwazulu-Natal Strategy” which he unveiled at the Provincial Council on AIDS.

Under his mentorship, he expects us to work very hard in:

- Ensuring that all clients eligible for ARV treatment are enrolled on the programme including those with a CD4 count under 500, as well as all pregnant HIV positive mothers and children under-5 years; and
- Ensuring that all patients on any treatment regime adhere to treatment requirements.

For this 1 million mark celebration, I also wish to single out our Nurses who are enrolled and participating on NIMART, the Nurse Initiated and Managed ART programme.

We acknowledge that we could not be where we are if we had not given our nurses the necessary training; mentoring and competency to give Prescription of ART as well as diagnose, treat and manage patients with HIV/AIDS.

Today, we are thus saying a big thank you to all the **1722 NIMAART Trained Nurses** for this 1 million mark milestone.

Indeed, we recognised that the HIV problem was and remains bigger than what doctors would have achieved. There is no way we could have been enrolling a Patient-Number-1 million in this Province, if this programme was run by doctors who are very few and far between.

If at all we plan to save more lives; our hopes rest with the acceleration of this program; so while we came to celebrate, we are here to recharge our nurses to do even more.

The other major achievements include:

- The Province having **618 facilities that are providing comprehensive HIV and AIDS services**, most **again being nurse driven**.
- Initiation of HIV-positive patients with a CD4 count of 500 or less on antiretroviral treatment, as opposed to the previous CD4 count of 350 before January 2015, and 200 before that;
- Ensuring that all HIV-positive pregnant women receive lifelong treatment, regardless of their CD4 counts;
- Seeing a Decrease in the Mother to Child Transmission of HIV significantly from **22% in 2008 to 5% in 2010 and to 1, 3% currently**. We intend further reducing this to **0, 5% by 2018**;
- Initiating **Health Services at Taxi Ranks** that entail screening amongst others Sexually Transmitted Infections, Tuberculosis, and HIV;
- Using **Operation Sukuma Sakhe** as a vehicle to promote and ensure early attendance of ante natal care services by pregnant mothers, which impacts positively on the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission [PMTCT] Programme;

- Launching the **Dual Protection Campaign**, which targets all TVET colleges in the Province to promote safe sexual and reproductive behaviour as means to curb unwanted and pregnancies as well as new infections.

All these efforts resulting in the reduction of deaths from **85 000 to about 35 000**, as reported in OSS booklet.

Our beautiful and remarkable story has even caught the eye of the UNAIDS Executive Director, Mr Sidibé, who said;

"I am confident that through the successful implementation of Operation Sukuma Sakhe, KwaZulu-Natal Province will realize our common vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths.

You are changing the course of the epidemic, not only in your country, but also on the continent and the world, by your efforts and achievements in the HIV response."

This milestone that we are marking today represents a change and an inspiration as we move towards ending AIDS by 2030.

I thank you